

Chapter 4

Children and Deployment



Family and friends can help children cope with the deployment. Encourage them to express their feelings by planning ahead and anticipate problems in advance. Be open and discuss the problems with the entire family while the soldier is still home.

Helping Children Cope with Deployment

The time before a deployment can be very stressful for parents and children. Confronted with an extended absence of a parent, family members may feel a sense of loss of stability and security. Children may not fully understand why one of their parents, or both in some cases, must leave. The child may become confused and fearful that Mommy or Daddy will abandon them.

Children are not very good at expressing fears and feelings in words. Anger and a desire for revenge, and guilt for feeling that way, are often demonstrated in the child's behavior. Change is puzzling to children. They want everything to remain the same. When change occurs, children usually have no other way to release anxieties, and no where to go for help. What can be done to help deal with the problems of pre-deployment? Think about these ideas which have been helpful to others in similar situations.

Talk To Your Children About The Deployment Before It Happens!

Communicate your thoughts and feelings about the separation before the member leaves. Be open and honest. Some parents worry that advance warning will only give the child more time to fret. However, children can sense when something is about to happen and worry more when they are left in the dark. They fill in the unknowns with their own fantasies, which can increase their anxieties. Knowing about the deployment in advance helps.

Build An Emotional Bond. The departing parent needs to spend time with each child INDIVIDUALLY before the deployment. Don't be afraid to hug your child. A display of affection is powerful communication. Older children (8 and over) appreciate being consulted about how long and where this "special" time together can occur. Use this time to share pride in your work, the Army, and the purpose for your deployment. Children of school age are beginning to understand some events must happen for the good of everyone. It is a little easier if Mom or Dad's job is seen as essential to the family's survival.

Often, when you ask if something is bothering them, a child will say "no." But there are ways to get through. Make some casual reference to your own worries or uncertain feelings about having to leave. Sometimes it enables a parent and child to share similar feelings. It also helps a child to realize his parent is a real person who can cry as well as laugh, and it models an appropriate way to release feelings by talking about them.

Help Children Plan For The Departure.

While packing your bags, allow the children to help. Suggest a "swap" of some token, something of your

child's that can be packed in a duffel bag in return for something that belongs to you. Discuss the household chores and let them choose (as much as possible) the ones they would rather do. Parents or caregivers need to agree with each other that responsibilities and chores are reasonable.

Visit Your Child's Teacher. Talk to your child's teacher before your departure, or write to the school so they will be informed of your absence. Frequently, children react to the deployment by misbehaving in class or performing poorly in their studies. A teacher who is aware of the situation is in a better position to be sensitive and encouraging. The deployed parent should leave at least three stamped, self-addressed envelopes with the teacher. Request periodic communication regarding the child's progress as well as special school or class products such as a newspaper or PTA newsletters.

Plan For Communicating. Expect children to stay in touch with their deployed parent. A lively discussion needs to take place before deployment. Encourage children to brainstorm the many ways communication can occur in addition to letter writing, such as cassette tapes, photographs, encoded messages, puzzle messages, and unusual paper for stationery.

Excellent Children's Books That Deal With Family-Change Situations

A Special Family Friend and

New Adventure, by Hoffman and Sittler

Will Dad Ever Move Back Home, by Paula Hogan

All Kinds of Families, by Norma Simon

If You Listen, by Charlotte Zoltow

The Good-bye Painting, by Linda Berman

The Giving Tree, by Shel Silverstein

Read them to your child if time allows, or have other family or friends read them in your absence, to help your child clarify facts and identify feelings.

Keep In Touch With Your Child. While you are away, communicate with each child

individually. No substitute exists for a letter with your own name on the envelope. Use unusual stamps, felt-tip pens, colored pencils, and different styles of alphabets and lettering.

Helping Children Cope

Tips for the Spouse Left Behind

Be Honest About Your Feelings. Don't attempt to hide feelings; your own or your children's. Often we try to spare children from our own self-doubts and fears.

The Surrogate Spouse. One trap to avoid is to use our children as a surrogate adult. We can easily get into situations where we start depending on our children for emotional support, to replace a spouse, or to act as a parent. If you find yourself expressing your emotions to a child as you would to your spouse, asking a child to discipline siblings, letting a child sleep with you, or other similar circumstances, step back, take a break, and examine your needs. Talk to a friend about it, write it out in your journal, or discuss it with your spouse during a Morale Call. Don't berate yourself for acting human. Make a plan on how to stop it, and implement your plan.

Measure The Passage Of Time. Families use techniques such as crossing off each day on a calendar, tearing a link off a paper chain representing the number of days or weeks the parent will be away, or building a paper chain.

Keep The Deployed Parent Well Informed. Do not make the mistake of depriving the parent of knowledge in their absence of what's going on at home, or the way things are being handled, out of fear of "distracting" or "worrying" him/her on the job where they cannot do anything about it. Parents need to know about their children and their homes. It also helps prepare them for their transition when they come home.

Be Responsible For All Discipline. Do not fall into the trap of using "Just wait until your father/mother gets home!" as the ultimate threat. How can a child be expected to greet with joy and affection a parent that has been held over their head for months as the ultimate punisher?

Tips for Caregivers

All of the above information for spouses also applies to caregivers in the parent(s) absence. Make sure the caregiver possesses all the important papers. Give them this Guide, with all forms filled out. Give them all the important phone numbers, doctors, dentist and relatives, etc. If the caregiver does not have access to the PX or Commissary, contact your Family Readiness Group Leader or unit point of contact so they can get special authorization during your absence.

Plan Ahead. The service member and caregiver should keep in contact to ensure communication ties remain consistent. Both need to keep each other informed for the welfare of the children and peace of mind. Parents should communicate orally and in writing before they leave on how they want things handled, such as discipline, chores, homework, etc. Give as much information as possible beforehand, and there will be less stress later for all concerned.



Making Separation Easier for Children

Hints for Making Separation Easier for Soldiers with Older Children



- Include the children as much as possible in the day to day planning, such as help with shopping and the grocery list.
- Prior to deployment, rules of the house must be established, and the stay-at-home parent needs to be consistent in following up on the family rules.
- Have a family photo taken of everyone together. A special photo of the soldier for the child's very own is nice.
- Let the children talk on a cassette, or send one from the entire family. Cassettes are like conversations with the soldier, and are important to children. They need to hear the soldier's voice, as well as receive letters. Each child should write individual letters, and the soldier needs to answer each one individually as well.
- Videos can play an important role. Children can make a video for the soldier, adding to it each

week. When the soldier returns, he can watch it with the family.

- Keep the soldier posted on family events such as ball games, schedules, class plays, etc. Don't forget that children like to receive photos of the soldier.
- Put a picture on the dining room table, bedroom nightstand or fireplace mantles. This reminds the children that the soldier is coming home.

Hints for Making Separation Easier for Soldiers with Young Children

- Let the children record cassettes to the soldier. This is good for toddlers who are learning how to talk; it keeps the soldier in touch with their progress.
- Get a map and follow the soldier around the U.S. or the world.
- The "I want my daddy/ mommy syndrome" can be helped by supplying the child with a laminated photo that the child can keep all the time.
- Get the soldier to record cassettes. They can read them a favorite bedtime story, or make one up.
- Make a photo album of the soldier with the children. This is good for both the soldier and child.
- Make a countdown chart with felt buttons and glue. Glue on the amount of days (if known) when the soldier will return; take off a button for each day passed. The last button comes off the day before the soldier gets home.

